FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
June 17, 2001

THE GREAT REVERSAL
John M. Buchanan

"*Grace* is one grand theological word that has not been spoiled ... people 'say *grace*' before meals, acknowledging daily bread as a gift from God. We are *grateful* for kindness, *gratified* by good news, *congratulated* when successful, *gracious* in hosting friends. When service pleases us we leave a *gratuity*. In each of these there is a pang of childlike delight in the undeserved.

A composer may add *grace* notes to the score, not essential, they are *gratuitous* and add a flourish whose presence would be missed. When I attempt a Beethoven sonata I play it a few times without the *grace* notes. The sonata carries along, but oh what a difference it makes when I am able to add in the *grace* notes, which season the piece like savory spices.

Philip Yancy
What's So Amazing About Grace?

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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THE GREAT REVERSAL
June 17, 2001

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Luke 7:36-50
Galatians 2:15-21

"Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love."
Luke 7:47 (NRSV)

The 213th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) met in Louisville last week and managed once again to make the front page of the newspaper. The prominent headline in yesterday's *Chicago Tribune* read "Presbyterians Call for Ordination of Gays," which is not exactly what happened.

What the General Assembly did was move in the direction of removing the restriction from ordaining—a restriction just four years old.

Since 1997, the constitution of the Presbyterian church has contained an amendment to its historic standards for ordination to ministry and to the offices of Elder and Deacon in local congregations, which prohibits the ordination of anyone who is either not living faithfully in a heterosexual marriage or chastity in singleness. For good measure, the amendment includes anyone who does not repent of any behavior our Book of Confessions calls sin.

Some think that's the way it ought to be; others of us think that it does not reflect the example and teaching of Jesus Christ, the head of the church. The Session of this church has taken that position and it is my personal position.

The effect of the Assembly's decision, if ratified by a majority of our presbyteries, will be to return to "governing body discretion"—i.e., return to local churches, their nominating committees and congregations—the right to choose officers on the basis of their conscience and sense of the leading of the Holy Spirit; and to presbyteries, that same right to ordain and install ministers.

It will not force a congregation to ordain any person it does not choose to ordain, nor will it prevent a congregation from ordaining, nor will it mandate inquiry into private sexual behavior.

Some argue that the Bible is clear about this matter and that the action of the General Assembly moves the church away from the Bible.

The fact is there are only six places in the Bible where same-sex behavior is mentioned, and there is no scholarly consensus about what those passages refer to and mean.

In fact, a majority of the biblical scholars at our Presbyterian seminaries have signed a statement indicating their conclusion that the six passages should not be used to support the prohibition of ordination.

We Presbyterians have never been fundamentalists. We believe that every individual text in the Bible is to be interpreted in light of the whole Bible. And so we conclude, for instance, that when the Bible says, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," that mandate must be understood in light of other Biblical mandates, such as "forgive your enemies, do good to those who persecute you, do not answer evil with evil."

The overture the General Assembly approved simply removes the prohibition from our constitution and allows each congregation to make its own determination about leadership. I have always favored that. I think it is basic Presbyterianism to respect differences of opinion and a diversity of positions.

The matter will be sent to the 173 presbyteries for their vote. In the past, a similar effort was not approved by a majority of our presbyteries. We hope and pray for a different outcome this time.

In the meantime, I want you to know that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), of which Fourth Presbyterian Church is a vital part, is a wonderful church, including more than 11,000 congregations, who are going about their business this morning, teaching their children, baptizing infants, nurturing their young people, caring for one another, growing in faith, and generously supporting mission in their own communities and the mission of Jesus Christ throughout the world through the agencies of the Presbyterian church.

The high point of the meeting of the General Assembly, for me, is always the opening worship service. Typically there are about 10,000 Presbyterians in attendance, with a large choir made up of all the choirs from the churches in the presbytery where the meeting is held. The worship includes leaders of all ages, from children to older people, wonderful hymn singing, great music. In the middle, a very moving event happens: the Presbyterian church recognizes retiring missionaries—this year six couples who had been working in mission and ministry overseas in the name of the church and in the name of Jesus Christ for forty years. It was a great moment. And then the church recognizes and commissions new mission workers: full-time missionaries, part-time and volunteer mission workers of all ages, including from this congregation, Dr. Shannon O'Connor, a new physician from Northwestern Medical School and a member of this church who, with her husband, Jeremy Smith, will be a volunteer in medical mission in Malawi this year; Bob and Dalia Baker, who are serving in Tirana, Albania; Rebecca Steward, who worked with the Bakers for a while; Jack and Joy Houston, in Guatemala. Presbyterian mission workers were commissioned to serve in an AIDS hospice in Africa, schools in India, hospitals in Kenya, churches and colleges in Egypt, Syria, and South America. It is a great moment and a reminder that, in spite of the controversies swirling about us, the Presbyterian tradition and the Presbyterian church is alive and well and faithfully at work in the world in the name of its Lord, Jesus Christ.

Dear God, we pray for your church this morning, holy, catholic, apostolic, in every part of the world, so richly diverse in character and personality, yet one church in your love and in the grace of your Son, Jesus Christ.

And we pray particularly for our church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Bless it. Keep it in your care in these difficult and fragile times. Bless its mission in the world, its ministers and members, its worship and witness.

Give it a new vision of your kingdom and its place in it.

And, O God, bless us here, in this place, that we may be a faithful church in all we do and say and that your saving love for the world may be clear and pure and gracious in our own life together, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Philip Yancey, in his book *What's So Amazing about Grace?* tells the story of a Chicago social worker who was working with prostitutes. A young woman was talking with the social worker, telling the reasons she became involved in prostitution—the money, the lifestyle, the near-impossibility of walking away, the living with a permanent sense of shame and guilt. She even told the social worker about hiring out her daughter. The case worker wrote:

> I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. . . . I had no idea what to say to this woman. At last I asked if she had ever thought about going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure naïve shock that crossed her face. "Church," she cried. "Why would I go there? I already feel terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

And Phil Yancey reflects: "Women much like the prostitute fled toward Christ, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she was to see Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift?" (p. 11).

The incident to which Yancey refers is found in Luke 7, our first lesson today. Jesus had been invited to dine in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Dinner was served in an open area, clearly visible from the street, the guests reclining, leaning near the table. Servants of the host customarily poured cool water over the guests' feet as the event began. It was a common social ritual. Simon had not done it, however, at least for Jesus. So in the middle of the meal, a woman walks in—"a sinner." What kind of "sinner" she is, is suggested by what happens next. She's carrying a flask of perfume, which she breaks and pours over his feet. Then she lets down her hair—a gesture of intimacy—and dries his feet. Simon, the host, is appalled. If Jesus knew what kind of woman this is—who she really was—he wouldn't be allowing her to touch him, he said, in a stage whisper audible to all.

So Jesus told the story about two debtors, one who owes a large amount of money, the other a small amount. The creditor forgave both. "Which will love the creditor more?" Jesus asked. "Why," Simon responded, "the one who was forgiven the most." And so Jesus said, "Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love."

That's what Jesus did—a radical and simple graciousness, acceptance and love that paid no attention to the rigid moral standards of the culture and religion and that reached out to all people, to everyone. He loved and accepted everyone, didn't seem to care about deviations from conventional social custom. He loved everyone the same, it seemed: Simon, the respectable Pharisee, and the prostitute off the street. No one had ever seen anything quite like it before. He got a reputation—"the friend of sinners" they called him. Wouldn't it be wonderful and faithful if his church earned and deserved the same reputation?

Now, fast-forward twenty-five years. After the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection appearance, his followers concentrated in Jerusalem, all of them Jews, and began to tell the story wherever they went. It never occurred to them that they were anything but Jews who believed that Jesus of Nazareth, the promised Messiah, had come. One of them, a Pharisee by the name of Saul, who had been a fierce opponent of the early Christians, was converted, believed, and became a proponent, an advocate, a missionary with the same energy and zeal that had formerly characterized his opposition. His method was to visit a town or city, go to the synagogue, tell the story of Jesus and the story of his own conversion. He did it successfully, apparently. Many believed, and inside those synagogues, those faith communities, were men and women and their families who constituted a new kind of religious group, followers of Jesus—not yet called Christians or a church, but getting close.

And then Saul, who is now calling himself Paul, ran out of synagogues. Up in Galatia, there were not very many Jews. So he told the story wherever he could. In the town square, in the marketplace, in public places and street corners where new ideas were proclaimed and discussed. Once he even did it in Athens, on Mars Hill, where the disciples of Aristotle and Plato gathered daily to talk.

He was successful in the Gentile cities of Galatia, but there was a big issue beginning to emerge. Back in Jerusalem, the headquarters of the new movement, where Jesus' friends Peter and John, and James, his own brother, were in charge, word arrived that Paul had moved out and away from the synagogues and was baptizing Gentiles—something that had never occurred to those first Jewish believers.

So they had a big meeting—a kind of General Assembly. Paul was summoned and made his case that what God had done in Jesus was for all people. And after a while, everybody agreed, shook hands, and Paul went back to work among the Gentiles.

But then the folk down in Jerusalem had second thoughts. Paul's making it too easy. Here we are, abiding by all the rules and laws and dietary restrictions, keeping feast days, circumcising our male babies—and Paul seems to have forgotten who he is, who Jesus was, after all. So they sent teams of teachers to the cities where Paul had been, to talk to the new Gentile believers. And this is what the Jerusalem teachers said: "If you really want to be a follower of Jesus, there are some things you need to do that Paul neglected to tell you. You need to become Jewish: keep the law, follow the dietary restrictions, observe the feast days, and your men must be circumcised."

Paul was livid. He decided to write a letter to his Galatian friends. It is an angry letter. It does not contain the conventional gracious beginning of his other letters. It does contain harsh, even crude language. But it also contains the basic gospel message of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ, God's love that no one can earn, no matter how many religious rules, laws, customs are followed, God's grace, which comes as a gift—to everyone—Jews and Greeks, male and female, slave and free, sinner and righteous.

Paul used the language of the legal system: "We are justified not by works of the law," he said, "but through faith in Jesus Christ." "No one," he said, "will be justified by the works of the law."

Now, "it is a long way from Galatia to Galveston," one commentator quipped. It does not occur to us to follow the law of Moses, to keep kosher, in order to be Christians. But is it not true that we are inclined to think that we are faithful Christians to the degree that we follow the rules and do things for God or believe certain ideas about God?

Two thousand years after Jesus, and after Paul wrote his letter, the Christian church is still arguing about what you have to do, or refrain from doing, in order to be faithful. The issue for the Galatian churches of the first century was how two communities—Jewish believers and Gentile believers—could live together in the church, each respecting the particularities and peculiarities of the other. It is still the issue.

Our issues, for better or worse, are not dietary restrictions and feast days but sexual behavior and authority. One group within our church has decided, on the basis of its reading of Scripture, that gay and lesbian people are not fit to be ordained officers. The other group, on the basis of its reading of Scripture, concludes that it is wrong to exclude persons on the basis of sexual orientation and practice alone. And the abiding question is whether or not there is room in the church for that diversity of opinion and conviction. One side says no: "Our answer is the only answer and if you can't come to the same conclusion we have, you can't be a leader in this church." To some of us, that sounds a lot like the zealots who traveled to Galatia to make sure the early church was pure and morally correct.

It also sounds to me like it misses the point of Paul's argument and Jesus' radically inclusive love. We are all sinners. Prostitute and Pharisee, new Gentile Christians and traditional followers of the law—and we all get in the kingdom, not because we deserve to be there or have earned the right to be there, but because he has invited us to be there. It's not our goodness or merit or deserving or good works. It's grace—his grace, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Religion has a notorious way of forgetting that, has a way of setting up moral and theological barriers or boundaries and then categorizing people on the basis of how they live. Jesus didn't do that. Paul argued against it. We can't seem to resist it, however.

The problem is that grace is contrary to common sense. Common sense tells us that everything must be paid for, that there is no such thing as a free lunch, that we are constantly being evaluated and judged by God.

The great theologian Karl Barth, wrote, "We don't like hearing that we are saved by grace. We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live by God's goodness alone" (*Deliverance to the Captives).*

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a prescription for making us deserving of God's love. It is, rather, the startling news that God loves us; that in Jesus Christ, God has laid down life itself for us; that what God wants most of us is that we should know that, understand it, receive it, and then live in joyful gratitude all our days.

In Karen Blixen's wonderful short story—made into an equally wonderful movie—"Babette's Feast," a community of grim, rigidly moral pietists is living on a small island off the coast of Denmark. They live a rough, mean life; their daily diet is a gruel of boiled cod fish and dry bread. And then Babette arrives and prepares to give the little community a banquet, extravagant beyond their wildest imagination—the best food, best wine, best desserts—simply because Babette wants to give it. At the banquet, grim, rigid moralism begins to melt, old wounds begin to be healed, old divisions begin to be closed, slights and insults are forgiven. At the end, one of the small group, a retired general, says:

> We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and shortsightedness, we imagine divine grace to be finite. But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see, and we realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude.

There was no applauding or cheering in Louisville when the vote was taken. There were tears in the eyes of people whose church has been holding them at arm's length, and their friends, their brothers and sisters, their parents. None of us gets in because we deserve it or have earned our way in. We are in because of God's grace—perfectly revealed in that man Jesus and his accepting, gracious, unconditional love.

> Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
> That saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost, but now am found,
> Was blind, but now I see.
>
> Amen.

Prayers of the People
By Donna Gray, Interim Associate Pastor for Children and Family Ministry

Warm, loving God, you father us all and embrace us in your great family of heaven and earth. We are proud to belong and to find in it this dignity that no one can take away. You have called us sons and daughters and adopted us as your children.

You have planted us in families. You have sheltered us under parents or guardians. You have nurtured us in family love. Like a good gardener, you have cared for our growth. This morning we give you thanks for the love and meaning we find in our families. Today we thank you for fathers, fathers who are mothers and fathers, and mothers who are fathers and mothers. We thank you for guardians who step in when there is no father or mother. We pray for those who are lonely because the family circle has been broken. We cannot place a value on the care given us by our parents. We realize not all children have that care. May they find a place in your family, a family full of variety, and at its best it is a family that is loving and nurturing.

Be with us on these summerlike days that surround us with long hours of sunlight and warmth. During the summer months when we have time to travel, grant us safety on the highways and in the air. When we have time to sit leisurely on a deck, balcony, or beach, grant us rest without a sense of guilt.

Hear our prayer for others. We pray for the new moderator of the General Assembly, Dr. Jack Rogers. Give him wisdom and insight as he serves the church this year.

We pray for the generation to which we belong, those with whom we share a common fund of memory and common standard of behavior.

We pray for those newly married. May they build homes where there is free welcome. At work or leisure, let them enjoy each other, forgive each other, and embrace each other.

We pray for those in hospitals, hoping for health.

We pray for those needing comfort for their sorrow.

Father, help your children everywhere to grow up and to grow together. As we follow the example of Jesus, may we become wiser—and not only wiser but also more loving. Through our life in your family, may we learn unselfishness and be ready to make sacrifices for your sake.

Hear us as we pray together, Our Father . . .